

Sermon: A Delightful and Honourable Sabbath

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One Sunday morning, a mother went in to a room to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church, to which he replied, "I'm not going." "Why not?" she asked. "I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "One, they don't like me, and two, I don't like them." His mother replied calmly, "I'll give YOU two good reasons why you SHOULD go to church. One, you're 54 years old, and two, you're the pastor!"

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this particular Sunday, the day of the Lord, we are going to reflect on the Sabbath, on how to keep it holy, and what it means for the Sabbath to be delightful and honourable.

First, 'Remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy!' is one of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mont Sinai, as Torah or the Law. According to Exodus 20:9, "*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.*" The reason given in such a rest is that for six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

In the context of the Exodus, Sabbath rest contrasts greatly to the experience of Israelites as slaves under the Egyptian Pharaoh. When Moses and Aaron first went to the Pharaoh, they presented what seems like a simple request, "*Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.*" (Exodus 5:1). Instead of granting what would've been a short three-days journey into the wilderness, Pharaoh questioned the legitimacy of this 'Lord' and angrily castigated Moses and Aaron for taking the people away from their work.

The term that Pharaoh used was 'stop labouring', or *וְהִשְׁבַּתֶּם* "*hishbatem*" in Hebrew, having the same root as the word *שַׁבַּת*, or Sabbath. So instead of granting his workers some much needed rest and dignity, this Egyptian despot actually increased their workload, by denying them strews needed to make bricks, thus forcing them to gather strews themselves.

Ironically, the words of the Pharaoh introduced the notion of Shabbat, and his actions laid the justification for the divine ordained rest that the Lord God would soon endorse. When the people served the Pharaoh, the idea

of rest seemed offensive, far out of reach. Yet when the people serve God, rest is built-in, commanded by God as God rejoices in what the Pharaoh detests, the dignity of all labourers, of you and I. So in a very real sense, Sabbath rest is a gift of God to the humankind, a rest from our weekly toil, from the burden of providing and sustaining life therefore, remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy.

Second, Sabbath rest is intimately connected to the search for justice. Isaiah 58 makes such a case. The Prophet opens the chapter with a searing critique of the religious practice of fasting. He then follows, in verse 6, with a rhetorical question and answer from the Lord, *“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”* Only by engaging in such a massive social reform will the light of Israel rise in the darkness, and the people’s gloom be no more.

Furthermore, the prophet demands the people, in verse 13, to refrain from trampling on the Sabbath, from pursuing one’s own interests on God’s holy day. Instead of serving one’s own affairs, the people of God should call the Sabbath a delight, and honour it, as the holy day of the Lord is indeed honourable.

These two demands go hand-in-hand. The search for justice seeks to heal what is broken on a societal level. Honouring the Sabbath seeks to restore people’s relational bond with God. One cannot operate independently from the other, as Proverbs 14:31 makes clear to us, *“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.”*

Third, and the final point: the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). This is a principle that Jesus laid out fairly early on in his ministry, in yet another dispute with the religious authority of the day. Although on that day, what is at stake was simply whether one is permitted to glean wheats from the field on the Sabbath.

The stake is dramatically higher in the story of Jesus healing a woman, in Luke 13, a women, who was under the bondage of a spirit that had cripple her for 18 years. For 18 years she was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. For 18 years she was considered unclean, an outcast from her faith community who lived a miserable existence.

We should note that she did not ask for healing from Jesus. The initiative rested entirely with the Lord, as Jesus called her over, laid his

hands on her, saying, "*Woman, you are set free from your ailment.*" Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. It would have been simply a wonderful story of healing, except it was done on the sacred day of Sabbath, in the sacred ground of the synagogue.

Sure enough, the leader of synagogue objected, ignoring the miraculous sign pointing to the Kingdom of God saying to the crowd most indignantly, "*There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day.*" (v.14)

What a cruel statement to make, ignoring the fact of her 18 miserable years of suffering (or roughly 6570 days), as if it was that easy of a task to be cured, on any other day. That statement was pure hypocrisy and Jesus wasn't about to let that synagogue leader get away with it, saying "*You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water?*" (v.15)

Ah, a good point made by Jesus! For the sake of life, even the lives of ox or donkey, work was permitted during the Sabbath. If that is the case, Jesus continued to explicate, "*And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?*"

Yes indeed she was a daughter of Abraham, a daughter of the covenant, of God's promise of Shalom. So Jesus lifted her up, from her lowly state of being bound by Satan for eighteen years. Literally and figuratively, she was lifted up by the Lord on that day, the day of Sabbath, as way by which God could be praised, and indeed God was praised that day.

The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath. It was entirely just that the oppressed should go free, and the yoke of 18 years of illness be broken on that day, the day of Sabbath. After Jesus called out his opponents and put them to shame, the crowd began to rejoice at all the wonderful things being done by the Lord. It was indeed **a delightful and honourable day.**

How then should we, as the community of faith, as followers of the way of Christ remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? The Church (here I am referring to the universal Church) has traditionally regarded Sunday, the day after the Jewish Sabbath, as the Lord's day, as the day for Sabbatical rest. Such rest, does not entail sleeping in for a few more hours, or kicking your feet up for a bit of R&R, or simply taking care one's own affairs.

The community of faith gathers for a corporate worship where the words of God is preached and from time to time, a sacramental meal is shared. It has always been our communal way of observing the Sabbath, of honouring God, of being in God's delight.

From time to time, people do ask me if they could miss a Sunday worship, and my answer has always been the same: of course! As long as one finds an equivalent way to honour God and rest in the Lord.

For if we treat the Sabbath as a day of joy, God's holy day as a celebration. If we honour it by refusing 'business as usual,' making money, running here and there. For If we do not neglect the needs of the poor, if we do not turn a blind eye to injustice all around us, and if we work together earnestly, seeking for true liberation, then we shall be free to enjoy God!

Oh, in the words of Eugene Peterson in the Message version of the Bible, God will make us ride high and soar above it all.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.